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## A WORD ON THE SUPERNATURAL

### I. THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL

That the idea of the supernatural is considerably out of favor in these days must be admitted, and the reason is clear. Modern science and philosophy are alike insistent in acclaiming that the world in which we live is a *universe*: consequently, when religion or the popular mind seems to assert the existence of a supernatural realm distinct from that of nature, there is immediate rebellion. "Reason can admit no dualisms in experience," is the cry—and this proposition we must acknowledge as valid. There can be no sharp line of cleavage between what are really two inseparable aspects of experience. But is it true that religion necessarily calls for such an objectionable dualism? Not so, I think, if we but recognize at the outset this principle—namely, that the distinction drawn by religion between the natural and the supernatural corresponds to the distinction drawn by philosophy between the phenomenal and the transcendental. Let us analyze the concept of the supernatural in the light of this principle, and then consider its special application to two important problems—the problem of revelation and of miracles.

In the first place, of course, the transcendental is *not* transcendent, but immanent in all phenomena; and the opposite view it is which lies at the bottom of the entire difficulty with regard to the supernatural. The term 'phenomenal' refers to all objects of immediate experience—objects and events as they are experienced by the human mind: the term 'transcendental' refers to the values or ends expressed through phenomena, and without which the world of phenomena has no meaning—not, be it noted again, to any separate world of things-in-themselves distinct from phenomena.

So, in the religious sphere, the term 'natural' should be understood as covering *all* phenomena, physical and mental, without exception; the term 'supernatural' as applying to the order of ends and purposes which is expressed through the

natural order. So understood, the common religious term 'supernatural event' or phenomenon will be seen to possess no real meaning, or at least to be a very inaccurate, even if partly necessary, expression of meaning. The term 'supernatural' should not be used with reference to occasional and striking phenomena, but to the spiritual values underlying all phenomena: the recognition of its existence means merely the acknowledgment that mental and physical phenomena are not ends in themselves, but manifestations of a transcendental or supernatural order of ends. What we often inaccurately call a 'supernatural event' or phenomenon, therefore, is really a perfectly natural phenomenon or event which is seen in some unusually direct or striking manner to reveal and express a supernatural and divine purpose.

Thus, in the application of these terms to revelation, we may say that all revelation is *as such* supernatural, or rather it is always the revelation of the supernatural *through* the natural. Let us elaborate this proposition by analysis. Every revelation involves four factors, each of which must be allowed for if we are to understand the nature of revelation at all—viz., the source, form, content, and purpose of the revelation. Religion affirms the *source* of every true revelation to be God, its *content* to be spiritual truth, and its *purpose* to be not merely religious knowledge for its own sake, but also the inspiration of conduct. Finally, religion, if it is to be consistent with the demands of modern science, must admit the necessary psychological *form* of every revelation. That is to say, the source and the content of any revelation are supernatural, its form natural, and its purpose at once natural and supernatural—supernatural as such, but fulfilling itself in the natural order and through natural media.

Now the unscientific theologian shows a great reluctance to admit *any* natural elements in revelation at all—a tendency to deny the psychological element together, and to neglect the ethical purpose of revelation. On the other hand, scientists show an equally unjustifiable tendency to deny the supernatural source and content of revelation, and an inclination to trace all religious experiences to the subconsciousness, or the self-deceived consciousness, of the experiencer. A complete analysis, how-

ever, cannot neglect any element, nor can the admission that every revelation must take a psychological form have any weakening effect upon the claims of religion. As a correspondent of the London *Spectator* wrote not long ago,<sup>1</sup> "divine revelations" are "no less divine in origin" (and, we may add, in content) "for being partly explicable from a psychological point of view. The operations of divine grace do not interrupt the course of nature." Revelation, as religion believes in it, no more overthrows the laws of mental life than free-will activity does—it is merely the infusion of a spiritual content and significance into that life. God cannot reveal Himself to the human soul, so long as it is an embodied and consequently psychologized soul, except through the ordinary mental processes; and the investigation of the *natural* processes is a scientific problem, the scientific psychologist being alone competent to deal with it. On the other hand, let the psychologist curb his megalomania and admit that the interpretation of the *supernatural* elements in whatever claims to be a spiritual revelation—its first source and essential content—belong to religion, and that scientific methods are totally inapplicable to the problem. In other words, the understanding and analysis of the natural element in revelation involves an intellectual process; but the appreciation of its supernatural value and significance involves a will-attitude or act of faith, and is not an intellectual matter at all.

## II. THE NORMAL AND THE SUPERNORMAL

Another point with regard to our general subject should be made here: that though a division of events or phenomena into natural and supernatural is illegitimate, there is a perfectly legitimate distinction between *normal* and *supernormal* phenomena. This distinction, well recognized in psychology to-day even by those who deny the existence of the supernormal, is to a certain degree analogous to that between the natural and the supernatural, although the terms themselves have a diverse connotation. The *supernormal* is that which transcends the

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<sup>1</sup>April 24, 1909.

normal, and is distinguished from the *abnormal*, or that which deviates from the normal, just as the *supernatural* is distinguished from the *unnatural*. Both terms, however, normal and supernormal, refer to phenomena—to the natural, and not to the supernatural—though it is, of course, impossible to make the line between them absolutely clear.

As to the problem of revelation, again, both terms are applicable to the formal element, the media and processes involved in a revelation, but not to its content. All revelations, as has been said, proceed originally from God as their Source; but God sometimes reveals Himself in perfectly normal, sometimes in supernormal, though always in perfectly natural, ways to the soul. Normal revelations take the 'form' of vague promptings of instinct or emotion, which may, when tested by reason and experience, attain the more definite 'form' of dogmas or propositions of a rational faith. Supernormal revelations, like certain oft-recorded supernormal experiences which have no religious significance, take the 'form' of dreams, visions, voices, etc., whose content must be tested—again by reason and experience—before they can be accepted as a genuine objective validity. We are not concerned at present with the method of verification, but merely the acknowledgment that the automatic nature of the psychological processes involved does not as such determine either way the nature, or even the reality or unreality, of the object of the experience. Between a true and a false revelation there is all the difference between what we may call spiritual perception and spiritual illusion, the two being no more different in *form* than physical perception and illusion are, though at opposite extremes in the matter of *validity*; but the determination of the latter is in either case a problem which only reason and subsequent experience can solve.

Now it is probable that all experiences known as visions are, from a strictly psychological point of view, hallucinatory in their nature—understanding by the term 'hallucination' a mental image to which no present objective physical stimulus corresponds, but which has nevertheless the characteristic feeling of objectivity attached to it. The definition, be it noted, is complete as to the *form* of an hallucination—that it is a

'mental image' involving the 'feeling of objectivity;' but is only partial and negative in its statement as to the actual objective *source* of the experience—that its stimulus is *not* a "present physical" one. The definition says nothing, however, about what its supernatural significance may be, and whether there is any *spiritual* object present or not, the determination of this being not a scientific problem at all.

Take, for example, St. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. The analysis of the psychological element which I have just made is undoubtedly perfectly compatible with the Apostle's account of the experience which led to his conversion. To call his vision an hallucination seems on the face of it to be playing into the hands of the enemy, but I think if we view the matter more deeply we shall find that such an interpretation of the psychological element will clarify the religious situation tremendously. Certainly there was no 'natural' physical Christ present—let us, at least, for the sake of our orthodoxy, *hope* there was not!—but, according to the Christian interpretation, it *was* the *spiritual* Christ who spoke to St. Paul, and the content of His revelation was spiritual truth. The 'hallucination,' if such it be, was, in other words, what psychologists call 'veridical,' or 'truth-telling,' and it is as rational to suppose that hallucinations may convey 'supernatural' truth 'supernormally' in the 'form' of a vision, as that it can so convey 'natural' truth, or supernormal knowledge of physical facts. As to the *result* of St. Paul's vision, he tells us himself that he was not disobedient to it. In this, after-events confirm what our analysis would indicate, to wit—that its purpose was not merely the conversion of St. Paul himself as the result of the insight conveyed through the revelation, but an inspiration to certain activities which should lead to the conversion of the Gentiles through his preaching.

### III. MIRACLES

Finally, as to the vexed problem of miracles. Certainly, there is no element of Christian belief which so arouses the amusement and sarcasm of the rationalist as the belief in miracles, an acknowledgment of which at once places the believer outside

the pale of reason and beneath the notice of the ordinary critic. The statement that this is a world of law and not of chance, and that God, if He exists, is a God of law and not of caprice, is generally regarded by the rationalist as a sufficient refutation of miracles; and for the believer to acknowledge all this, instead of retrieving him in the eye of the disbeliever, has the opposite effect of condemning his intelligence still more! What is the reason for this? Simply the acceptance by the rationalist of what Professor G. A. Knight<sup>2</sup> excellently calls the 'fiat' definition of miracle as the only legitimate one. A miracle, says the rationalist, is a suspension or actual violation of natural law—major premise; but natural laws are universal and unchangeable—'minor premise; therefore miracles do not happen—conclusion. Now, even if we refrain from criticizing this very crude but common concept of 'natural law' and admit the minor premise, still the definition on which the argument is based is false, and the whole argument invalidated thereby. A miracle is not a violation but actually a manifestation of law: it is not a suspension of natural law, but a manifestation of spiritual law. That is to say, the true concept of miracle is the 'immanent' concept, as Dr. Knight calls it—a miracle is always an expression of divine, spiritual, or supernatural activity through and in control of natural forces.

Thus defined, a miracle is a phenomenon which cannot be explained on the grounds of any known law—an unexplained but not inexplicable phenomenon. It is not, properly speaking, a "supernatural event," for I have already indicated the meaninglessness of this expression, but a natural phenomenon which directly and strikingly manifests the supernatural. It is not a purposeless or causeless phenomenon, but an expression of a supernatural or divine purpose through the use of unknown or only partially known natural causes. All events have natural causes, and all events have ultimately a divine purpose or end—a phenomenal and a transcendental aspect; but while some events are manifestations of ordinary forces in nature,

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<sup>2</sup>"The Definition of the Supernatural," *Harvard Theological Review*, July, 1910.

others, which we call miracles, are manifestations of unusual forces. In other words, though God reveals Himself always through natural causes, He sometimes reveals Himself in extraordinary or supernormal ways.

Here again, as in our discussion of revelation, we are not considering the reality of any alleged miracle, but only seeking to vindicate their general possibility and rationality. As to the facts, it is theoretically indifferent whether we take the faith-attitude of accepting the Bible miracles, for example, on the ground of authority, or the agnostic attitude of rejecting them on the ground of insufficient evidence—the choice between these alternatives is purely a matter of practical attitude or religious interpretation either way. The ‘rationalistic’ method of rejecting miracles on the ground of impossibility *is*, however, absolutely irrational and theoretically unjustifiable; for, once we accept the ‘immanent’ concept, which views a miracle as a natural but supernormal event, all real difficulty as to the inherent reasonableness and possibility of such phenomena disappears.

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